

Circles within Circles April 10

The Imperial Russian “Black Chamber” in the Foreign Ministry was quite proficient in decrypting the diplomatic telegrams of other European nations in the period before World War I and early in the war. An undated anecdote in a postwar memoir mentions one shocking decrypt the Russians encountered.

It was confusing at first: “BERCHTOLD INQUIRES URGENTLY OF PALLAVICINI HOW IT IS TO BE EXPLAINED THAT A CERTAIN BORISOW IS TELEGRAPHING A CERTAIN PAWLOW INSTRUCTIONS ANALOGOUS TO THOSE WHICH HE WAS GIVING PALLAVICINI?

Count Berchtold was the Austrian Foreign Minister; Count Pallavicini was the Austrian ambassador to the Ottoman Empire.

Borisov and Pawlow were Russian diplomats. They had telegraphed the decrypt of a message from Vienna to Constantinople. The message quoted above, a later Austrian message, revealed to them that at the same time the Russian Black Chamber was intercepting and solving encrypted Austrian diplomatic telegrams, the Austrians were intercepting and decrypting Russian diplomatic telegrams!

Source: adapted from W. K. Korostowetz, *Lenin in the House of the Father*, translated by R. W. Pettengill and published in the *ASA Review* in 1947. ASA (the Army Security Agency) was a predecessor to today’s INSCOM (Army Intelligence and Security Command).